

**‘Sharing My Voice’:
A Young Person’s Story of Inclusion and
Belonging Through Shared Song**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents qualitative results from a single-participant case study in an educational setting. It explores issues related to belonging and inclusion in the group singing experiences of a young Ukrainian refugee in the United Kingdom. It employs an Indigenous research paradigm to contextualise the findings in the past and present cultural contexts of the participant. To answer the question, ‘How has membership of a youth choir impacted the participant’s sense of identity, belonging and inclusion?’, observation, interview and literature review data were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach. The data suggest that sharing in collaborative action, mediated through certain community influences impacted her sense of well-being, autonomy and personal development. Furthermore, it is theorised that the act of group singing in particular facilitated her journey from the periphery of the choir group to the centre of the communal life of the choir.

KEYWORDS

Singing; Inclusion; Sharing; Belonging; Refugees

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INTRODUCTION

A loss of social connection is a prominent challenge faced by refugees (Gifford, *et al.*, 2007; Marsh, 2016), particularly adolescents, as they navigate their position in social life. Studies have shown that involvement in the arts cultivates a sense of belonging through membership of musical communities (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008; Sæther, 2008). Group singing, in particular, can increase children's self-esteem (Zapata and Hargreaves, 2018) giving a greater sense of social inclusion (Parker, 2010, 2014; Welch *et al.*, 2014) and connectedness (Glew *et al.* 2021). Good and Russo (2016) believe this comes from the group environment that facilitates collaboration.

This qualitative study is situated within the Indigenous research paradigm that emphasises relationships and relationality. The study applies a constructivist grounded theory analysis to a single-participant case study. The aim of the study is to explore the impact of shared experience through group singing on a refugee's process of inclusion and belonging after relocation. Triangulated methods draw on interview, observation and literature data to formulate a theory based on the experiences of one adolescent Ukrainian refugee participating in a British Youth Choir. It can be important to focus on a personal story as it may offer significant insights for broader policy and practice by respecting and valuing subjective experiences. This is part of the effort to cultivate an ethic of inclusion in music education.

This paper begins by outlining our personal contexts, experiences, and positionality. It is intended that this transparently grounds the study in our relative truths and allows readers to understand the influencing factors behind theory development. To centralise the participant's story, the literature review is included at the end of the paper. This is used to critically evaluate our analysis (Dunne, 2011). This evaluation situates our project within the wider body of research, offering readers an opportunity for reflection on current practice and suggesting future avenues for research.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICAL CONTEXT

This research took place at an auditioned, age 7-19 choir, which is part of a large city music hub in the United Kingdom. The city is a 'city of sanctuary'¹ with a strong ethic of social justice, reflected in the values of the music hub. The choir's mission is to be a centre of excellence on vocal music education. It has been established for more than forty years and performs regular, high-profile events, with 4-5 concerts per academic year and an annual international tour. They sing music from a range of genres, rooted in Western classical traditions. The choir is divided into age and voice groups (e.g. junior voices, senior upper voices, senior soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices). In the main, these groups rehearse separately, coming together for rehearsals of joint performances in the 'full choir' 3-4 times a year. Weekly rehearsals are highly structured, including warm-up, technical vocal and musical skills training, repertoire learning and performance technique. There is a

¹ City of Sanctuary is a UK based charity that coordinates and supports networks of community organisations that try to improve the situation for asylum seekers and refugees.

10-15-minute social break in each rehearsal. Members are primarily white British; with some singers whose families are economic migrants.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCHERS

Samyukta: My background is in Indian Classical Music, which led me to my role as an indigenous researcher. As such, I respect experience as data and cultural context as intertwined with research findings and outputs. I believe that any research conducted should benefit the community with which it was conducted. I do not know the participant personally, but my paradigmatic view aligned with the goals of the project. My specific role in this project was to co-analyse data and provide insights into the Indigenous research paradigm and related methods.

Jenna: I am a participant researcher in this project, as I work on the conducting staff at the youth choir. I have a constructivist perspective; that is, I believe there can be multiple interpretations and meanings found within phenomena depending on the experiences and cultural contexts of participants. I am aware that my relationship with the participant may impact the research process. Rather than remaining passive, I acknowledge that my place as an active participant in the social context is vital and can be useful in understanding the nuances of data. My specific role in this project was to lead data collection and provide insight into the context around the choir and the research participant.

INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANT

The participant had been a member of the choir for 6 months prior to data collection taking place. Below she is introduced in her own words via an edited extract from an initial biographical interview conducted at the start of the data collection process. The editing has not changed her words but has omitted pauses and questions.

“My name is Ana² ... I am from the west part of Ukraine. I am the youngest child in my family. I am sixteen years old. I've lived in Ukraine, like all my life. And it's my first time being abroad.

I was very like, outgoing person ... In Ukraine, my like secondary school [and] my music school was a separate school. Like, I did this after my main school. Because I was just, like, good at it everyone just wanted me to perform and stuff. I'd studied there for 8 years. I was involved in many different musical stuff, like competitions, performing as well. Many new concerts as well. I went to play piano, that was like, my main thing in musical school. But besides that, I was taking part in the choir, my solo lessons, like private singing lessons, and also some smaller groups like ensembles.

But then everything, like in February³, everything started [the war] ... Everyone was so stressed. No one knew what to do. All schools were closed ... It was quite scary and like worrying because of the alarm of the air raid. It was stressing and we were hiding as well.

At first, we didn't plan to go ... My mother offered me the idea to move because my sister is here. And one of the main reasons why we decided to move because of my education. And the funniest thing is that I didn't want to ... I was just like, No. Are

² The participant's name has been changed to protect her privacy.

³ February 2024, when Ukraine was invaded by Russia.

you crazy? I don't want to change. I don't want to move. Like all my friends are here, oh, my family and my cat is here as well. But then one day, something clicked in my head. And I was just like, yeah, yeah, why not? We can try. And it was definitely one of the best decisions in my life. Because like, it changed my life completely. And yeah, and I'm here now."

METHODOLOGY AND PARADIGM

CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

Existing studies rarely focus on refugee experiences in a non-school, choral education. Similarly, there are relatively few studies that focus on individual cases to explore the nuances of personal experiences. To fill this gap we conducted an exploratory, experience-based case study, with a single participant as our unit of analysis. A Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology was applied, as it is considered beneficial when generating new theories in under-researched areas (Dunn, *et al.*, 2023). Since our research is about both the experience of the participant and how she uses her participation in a musical community to adapt to her new environment, CGT was selected as it explores both human experiences and social processes.

THE INDIGENOUS RESEARCH PARADIGM

The Indigenous research paradigm (IRP) emphasises relationships and relationality. The importance of relationships in this study is highlighted by Jenna's relationship with Ana, whose experience is influenced by the various community relationships she has. To understand her experience and process of belonging, we employed IRP's method of storytelling and personal narrative (Wilson, 2020), allowing a holistic, in-depth understanding of her experience as it is contextually situated. Moreover, the uniqueness of each individual's experience is respected and treated as data (Datta, 2017b). This adds to the collective knowledge of the community that participates in the research. A CGT approach situated within IRP prioritises the participant, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the participant's lived experiences and their interaction with broader sociocultural contexts, which are inextricably linked (Pidgeon and Riley, 2021).

CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

Within the broader context of CGT, a case study design was felt most appropriate for gaining a deep qualitative understanding of biographical data from a single life (Oates, 1986). Case study design facilitates investigation of "*a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context*" (Yin, 2017, p. 18). The goal of qualitative research does not need to be generalisable (Tomaszewski *et al.*, 2020). Instead, it can be focused on developing a deep understanding of a specific community and context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and seeking benefits to them. The current study seeks to benefit both Ana and the wider choir community through improved awareness, understanding and practitioner skills. Ana's tacit knowledge may also be transferable to similar contexts (Stevenson, 2004). Through thoughtful examination of processes and experiences, case studies provide a useful framework for analysing and evaluating practice and developing theory (Tomaszewski *et al.*, 2020).

To critically analyse and justify the adoption of a case study design and address areas of bias in our study, we have applied Yin's (2017) methodological analysis.

According to Yin, a single-participant case study may be justified if it meets some or all of the criteria of being (i) critical, (ii) unusual, (iii) common, (iv) revelatory, or (v) longitudinal. The present study matches these criteria as follows:

- i) *Criticality* is ensured through triangulation of methods, adoption of a clear analytical framework and the inclusion of two researchers, the participant researcher and the external researcher who brought an outside perspective.
- ii) The study is *unusual* as the participant differs from the usual profile of the choir members.
- iii) Data collection findings seek to capture knowledge of everyday, or *common*, phenomena in the life of the participants.
- iv) The project is *revelatory* in the sense that similar research has not previously been conducted in this specific context. It may reveal theoretical and practical insights relevant to others in similar situations.
- v) Data collection takes place over an extended period, with multiple interactions being observed, thus being a *longitudinal* study.

METHODS

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Exploratory observation of fourteen rehearsals was undertaken over a five-month period. Reflexivity sampling (Hesse-Bieber and Piatelli, 2007) was utilised, with audio-recorded field notes and reflections in action and following rehearsal. Notes were then transcribed with added anecdotal recollections. An observation guide was used to help structure reflections. Findings from the observations led to the discovery of background information and ideas, also known as ‘sensitising concepts’ according to CGT (Charmaz, 2006). This contributed to the design of research questions and the interview schedule.

INTERVIEWS

Two conversational online, audio-visually recorded interviews were conducted:

1. An unstructured, narrative interview gathering biographical information.
2. A semi-structured interview exploring Ana’s experiences of group singing.

In line with IRP, a less structured, personal narrative approach was taken to challenge the power structures that can often be seen between researcher and researched (Datta, 2017a). Storytelling (Datta, 2017b) and holding a conversation, rather than asking formalised questions, helped to move the process as far as possible towards a non-hierarchical structure, which contributed to and encouraged knowledge co-construction (Oakley, 1981; DeVault and Goss, 2007).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The four Rs of IRP (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) provided the ethical framework for this study, summarised in Figure 1 below.

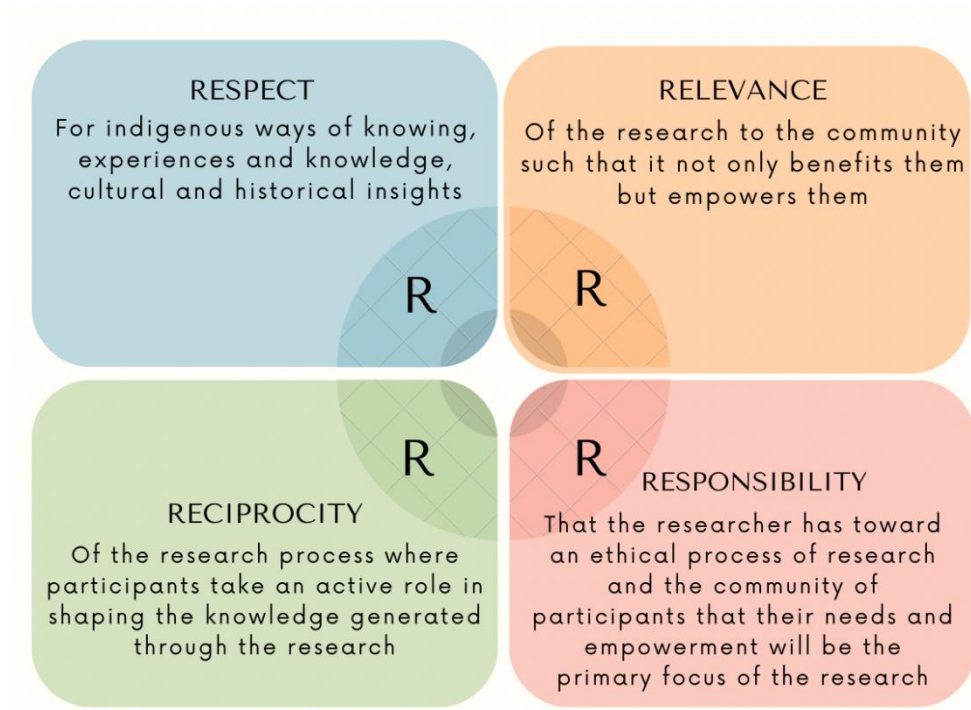


Figure 1. The four considerations developed by Kirkness and Barnhardt image developed by Ranganathan, 2023.

Within this framework, written parental and participant consent was sought, with all parties briefed verbally and in writing about the aims, objectives, context and processes of the study. During data collection the participant was informed about possible sources of support should the sensitive topics covered cause emotional distress. Support included members of the pastoral team based at the youth choir and previous training undertaken by the practitioner-researcher in areas such as safeguarding, mental health first aid, and trauma-informed practice. Ethical approval was granted by the organisation where the research took place, according to their governance procedures. Data was stored securely according to the UK's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In the recording and dissemination of findings, participant and contextual details have been obscured to protect their identity.

DATA ANALYSIS

We independently arrived at sensitising concepts using open coding. The first round of interview coding consisted of independent, open coding followed by a second round of joint focused coding. To develop categories, themes and theory, a joint discussion between the researchers provided flexibility in data interpretation and allowed us to be open to multiple insights emerging from the data. Furthermore, as Samyukta did not know the participant or conduct the data collection, these discussions provided space for reflexivity between the two researchers to understand the different roles taken, enabling robust theory building and bias checking.

LITERATURE REVIEW STRATEGY

A critical narrative literature review was conducted after the empirical data collection, in accordance with a Grounded Theory approach. This allowed us to test the developed theories in the wider context of existing research and integrate

findings from previous studies with our own analysis. A systematic approach to searching was applied according to the process outlined by Bramer *et al.* (2018). Relevant databases were searched using keywords and Boolean filters that had been derived from concept mapping of our extant knowledge. Congruent with IRP, both grey (non-peer reviewed, secondary) and white (peer-reviewed, primary) literature sources were included for review to help prevent academic bias (Jones *et al.*, 2017). To maintain rigour in selected sources, literature was assessed using Boote and Beil's categories for quality (2005). These include a scoring rubric focused on *coverage* (the rigour of the inclusion/exclusion parameters for literature review), *synthesis* (contextualisation of the source data), *methodology* (assessment of rigour for empirical research), *significance* (scholarly and practical consequence of findings) and *rhetoric* (quality of written material).

Further exclusion criteria included:

- articles not written in English
- studies conducted in the context of refugee camps (as this is different from a settled refugee context)
- articles not discussing group singing
- articles with adult participant populations
- articles related to music therapy
- documents dated pre-1990 (ensuring most up-to-date understanding)

This process yielded 19 articles for full review.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Through this analysis, we arrived at the following research question:

How has membership of a youth choir impacted the participant's sense of identity, belonging and inclusion?

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

PRESENTATION OF THEMES

The analysis revealed three overarching themes that spoke to Ana's process of inclusion and belonging. The illustrative quotes under the sub-themes in each of the diagrams below show the contrasting experiences Ana had in her musical life in Ukraine and in her new singing community as a refugee.

COLLABORATIVE ACTION:

Actions taken by Ana and her musical community, either through personal communication or communication through music, play-based musical approaches, and the ability to share outcomes such as performance.

REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES FOR THEME "COLLABORATIVE ACTION"

Music as communication:

In Ukraine: ...in my main school, I had my classmates and we were quite close together. My music school... I also had classmates... But I think I, in the beginning, I had less friends than when I was growing up.

In UK: I think I made friends in choir more easily than in my school. Because in my school I was like really?... I was struggling with language much more in the beginning than now.

Sharing (of themselves and others doing the same):

In Ukraine: I was the kind of person that everyone was like, rely on...all my teachers...were saying that I'm...responsible child... I was the person who was singing and preaching... all the time, everywhere

In UK: In my experience of sharing with friends there's a special kind of sharing in choir. during breaks or something, my friends and I can like sing in between... other songs like not the music we learn.

Playing (different approaches to music):

In Ukraine: ...we usually just sing and like you're doing scales or like something with mouth... We have never done like, quite physical warm up before singing before.

In UK: One of the things that I really was impressed is that when you like to doing warm up... we actually warmed up like the whole body. Like we were like shaking and making movements with the body...that was a good thing. I really liked it. And also, we did some funny stuff...It was quite funny as well, because like, I've never done it before I go, and it was interesting experience.

Music creates opportunity:

In Ukraine: I also took part in like music club music video... I went to record studio, and I was recording my part. And then we were making a music clip and music video...it was nice experience.

In UK: It's really precious and valuable for me to be included in a choir, being included in such a massive thing. Because it's really beautiful, especially the concerts and like the rehearsals... the energy is so special and the feelings memories are really powerful and amazing.

Figure 2. Quotations illustrating collaborative action

COMMUNITY INFLUENCES:

Her community and the space she inhabited when group singing contributed to her process of grounding and belonging. For example, having a safe space filled with positive role models enabled her to be who she was without judgement. She was also allowed time to immerse herself in the music and the community, which further assisted her understanding and involvement with the new culture she found herself in.

REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES FOR THEME "COMMUNITY INFLUENCES"

Time:

In Ukraine: *In music school, like in year one, two, and three, like I had less friends, but then more and more and more like I was, yeah, more matured.*

In UK: *In the beginning...was hard for me to share that I'm Ukraine, because every single time when I was saying that...the atmosphere and the change like the emotion change, like emotions...changed so quickly, and I didn't really like it...But like, one time, I realised that it's part of me and I it's not something that I should hide...So I think I find it quite useful that it was for my own time to share that. Yeah. It gave me time to settle and be at home.*

Positive role models:

In Ukraine: *In my music school, there was a teacher who is a songwriter as well, and a singer in my town, and she's quite famous. And she released many of her songs. And she had, she had a team of like, young people singing with choir together, and I was part of that team.*

In UK: *They were also so talented. There was a girl...was really nice at sight reading...I was so impressed with that, because like, I'm not that good at that. And she was just like, give her a piece of music and she would just like singing without hearing before...it was really impressive.*

Safe space:

In Ukraine: *It was the time when my family like, came all together. And we'll live all in one house... keeping close to each other.*

In UK: *It's safe to be open and we all kind of feel like that so we are open together and it's easy.*

Music immersion as grounding:

In Ukraine: *I was taking part in the choir, my solo lessons, like private singing lessons, and also some smaller groups like ensembles and stuff.*

In UK: *Choir is helped me a lot with learning...English Christmas carols. And that's why... I was able to sing them in my school or like just on a street when I heard someone singing it. And it helped me like, get the culture better.*

Togetherness and connection:

In Ukraine: *And she had, she had a team of like, young people singing... Before the war, it was Christmas time. And it was the time when we were singing carols together.*

In UK: *...belonging is like is to have a connection...to the place you love... to the people you like to belong to the choir to or to belong to the music is that connection like you're giving yourself to that.*

Figure 3. Quotations illustrating community influences

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING:

A large influence on her ability to integrate into the community was driven by the personal well-being and growth she found through her involvement with group singing. She was once an outgoing, confident person, yet, in contrast, observations showed her initially to be shy. Her ability to connect with her old self signified feeling ‘*at home*’ and belonging due to being in a community that encouraged her to express herself without inhibition. Sharing emotional and spiritual connection through music was highlighted as a driver of her sense of belonging.

REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES FOR THEME “PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING”

Emotional/spiritual experience during singing:

In Ukraine: *Because it was summertime, so it was quite nice. And we went to the mountains, like we went to the lake and the top of the mountains, one of them.*

In UK: *I believe when you sing together, it makes like really special atmosphere... And it definitely brings people closer when you like, sing together, and you enjoy it... I would say especially when you have different voices, and you create harmony...It's magical feeling.*

Learning from diverse experiences:

In Ukraine: *I'd studied there for 8 years... It was an interesting experience for me...I was involved in many different musical stuff.*

In UK: *Because music is everyone hears music differently, even though it's same melody or something. So even though like people listening to the same song they can except to like refer to yourself like differently, something that makes sense. So I think it makes like, different influence and like impact.*

Uninhibited self-expression:

In Ukraine: *I was writing little stories, like little fairy tales as well, when I was younger. They were not perfect. Like, just just random stuff with a kid. Especially like, thing with poems. I was trying myself in this creative writing and stuff. Because I love that.*

In UK: *...what I really liked about my group...I felt like no one was afraid to be themselves...they were just expressing themselves...And I really liked it. Because that's what it is something that I struggled with, like being fully myself.*

Evolving relationship with music:

In Ukraine: *there was a time when I hated it. And I wanted to leave everything ...And there was crying and saying, Mom, take me away from the music school.*

In UK: *You have three exams per year in my musical school, and it was so stressing for me, and I was just like, ready to give up. But I didn't. And when I came here, my view of music like has changed completely because like...it's really different.*

Figure 4. Quotes illustrating personal development and wellbeing

The illustrative quotes in Figure 3 showcase the commonality of musical interests between her past life and her new socio-cultural reality and highlight certain key differences. These commonalities include her enjoyment of performance and performing in a team, her looking up to her musical teachers as positive role models, and her enjoyment of the holistic experience of singing. The differences, however, also provide us with a lens through which to uncover aspects of her UK musical community that helped her integrate and develop a sense of belonging. In particular,

incorporating play and doing “*funny*” exercises as part of choir rehearsals helped her feel more at ease in the space. This was linked to her description of her old musical learning experience being more stringent and summative compared to the more formative and enjoyment-focused approach in her UK choir.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A sense of belonging is crucial for successful community integration (Caxaj and Berman, 2010). For children and adolescents, a sense of belonging and inclusion is particularly important at a time of heightened self-awareness and exploration of their place in the world (Newman *et al.*, 2007). Gould (2005) highlights four main strands necessary for social integration of refugees:

1. Continuing cultural practices and maintaining cultural identity of origin nations
2. Gaining understanding of the cultural values of the new society
3. Opportunity to participate in new cultural life
4. The new community gains knowledge and understanding of the cultural practices and values of the refugee's country of origin.

Involvement in musical activities has been shown to assist in the development of new relationships and systems of belonging (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008; Sæther, 2008) by facilitating awareness and understanding of cultures, and greater involvement in social practices. Simply being present, however, or participating in musical activity is not a guarantee of being accepted into a group or feeling that one belongs. It offers opportunity, but requires more than sharing time, space and activity to cultivate a true sense of belonging.

GROUP SINGING AND SHARING

There are several aspects of sharing identified as being useful for generating feelings of belonging in choirs. The first of these relates to organisational aims. Choirs are collaborative, with singers working together for a shared outcome. Good and Russo (2016) found that involvement in a choir led to greater cooperation and teamwork among children. This suggested music can be a vehicle for creating communities of practice (Kenny, 2016), with sharing in the music-making process cementing social bonds by providing opportunities for interaction (Pitts, 2016). Additionally, the constructivist nature of musical engagement (Crawford, 2017) seems to contribute to feelings of autonomy and self-regulation among participants as they create and experience music together.

Frankenberg *et al.* (2016) suggest that the orientation of a choir towards performance is an additional factor that cultivates greater social bonds through a shared experience of performance excitement, nerves and participating in unique aspects of performance. This resonates with Clayton (2012) who discusses entrainment and bonding through shared pulse vibrations. In choirs, this multi-sensory sharing seems to provide a sense of connection, facilitating opportunities for more tangible forms of relationality. Marsh (2016), however, highlights potential tensions between music-making that is participatory and music-making that is performative. Focus on preparing for performance necessitates ambition toward excellence (Turino, 2008). However, participatory goals often involve more opportunities for collaboration and social engagement (Marsh, 2016). Despite this, Marsh does highlight a wider social benefit of performance. The pride and respect

generated by audiences is another unique form of shared emotional experience, which may further unify social bonds and friendships.

Two studies by Crawford (2017, 2020) extend these theories of respect by examining mutual respect shared between singers. Appreciation for the vocal skills of co-singers was found to enhance friendships and provide inspiration for personal musical skill development, as well as a safe space for vulnerability and openness. Sharing personal stories, particularly those related to a painful past, was found to be facilitated by group singing (Marsh, 2016). Where verbal expression was not possible, Soto *et al.* (2009) found singing offered a form of non-conversational communication giving participants a means of self-expression and self-actualisation that was otherwise harder to facilitate due to language barriers. Crawford refers to the benefits of ‘transculturation’ (2020, p. 250), a process where cultural knowledge is shared in a two-way dialogue, for example between refugee and non-refugee participants. Engagement in musical activities can help refugees with transculturation. Through interaction with music from other cultures, as well as teamwork and co-construction of musical activities, refugees can gain deeper awareness of the cultural values and traditions of their new country. Frankenberg *et al.* (2016) argued that choir membership was particularly helpful for cultural inclusion and cultivating a sense of belonging as it involved music-making together rather than solo music-making. In keeping with understanding of transculturation as a two-way, relational process (Crawford, 2020) further studies have found that sharing songs from refugees’ countries of origin was a way of promoting greater social inclusion (Karlsen and Westerlund, 2010; Marsh, 2015).

GROUP SINGING AND INCLUSION

Rinde (2023) provides insights into how choir leaders play an important part in inclusivity through facilitation of cultural sharing. Rinde and Kenny (2021) caution that it is important for teachers to carefully consider their roles in promoting inclusion and belonging. Some practices can have an exclusionary effect, such as too much or too little focus on the home cultures of the newly arrived. Choir leaders have a responsibility for the degree to which the rehearsal environment feels a safe space for the vulnerability and openness needed when engaging in creative processes and making meaningful connections. This can be done through incorporating students’ choices in rehearsals and performances (Rinde, 2023) and embedding musical play into rehearsals.

Play helps create a rehearsal environment injected with joy (Jeanneret and Brown, 2007). Fun is important in successful music education, as it helps people feel safe and connected through playful practices. This co-created joyfulness can foster synchrony in communicative interactions between singers regardless of diversity of background (Cross, cited in Marsh, 2016) or language barriers. Engagement in communal music activities has helped to overcome language barriers as the shared musical experience facilitated a means of expression that could be understood by all without the need for words (Carlow, 2004; Crawford, 2020). This provided equity of experience and supported refugees by making it easier for them to engage in other social activities outside of singing (Carlow, 2004).

Through these activities, Kenny (2016) demonstrates how there can be a shift from being at the margins of the community to actively participating and moving to the centre of the community. In Rinde and Kenny’s study (2021) most children moved from peripheral to central engagement in musical activities over time as their social

bonds grew. However, Rinde and Kenny did note that this is not always the case, and it would be interesting to research the reasons why some students do not make this journey (ibid). Pearce *et al.* (2015) suggest that time influences people's feelings of belonging and inclusion, possibly explaining why some people do not undertake the periphery-to-centre journey in the studies analysed for this literature review.

GROUP SINGING AND BELONGING

In literature evidence now emerges that through sharing, refugee children are more included in group singing and wider society and that this inculcates a sense of belonging. Music is a social activity; an act of communication with ourselves and each other. Through this collaborative approach, friendships and a sense of belonging can be fostered (Pitts, 2016).

Collaborating with peers in music-making activities may lead to greater communication and expression of self, which can manifest itself in increased uninhibitedness over time (Pitts, 2016). This sense of belonging has been characterised by Crawford (2017) as the development of a community of practice. In her study, students reported feeling like a team and wanting to do their best and perform to their highest standards to support the ensemble. The desire to contribute to the group experience provides an extrinsic motivational factor related to the desire for social inclusion. Whilst such motivational factors may be deemed important from an educational theory context, we must also be mindful of the potential pressure this may put on the newly arrived. Pressure to be included and not to be excluded through failing to contribute adequately or appropriately in the eyes of the rest of the ensemble could be potentially harmful to the mental well-being of the young person. Therefore, choir leaders need to consider this when planning repertoire and the teaching of singing skills. There needs to be active teaching rather than assumption of prior levels of skill and experience.

A particularly interesting finding from Rinde and Kenny (2021) is that involvement in musical activities has the potential not only to assist the development of new relationships and systems of belonging but can also support the memory of belonging in refugees' countries of origin. When many things are uncertain, unknown and potentially scary for a newly arrived young person, the sense of connection to prior feelings of inclusion and belonging can provide an anchor for feelings of safety and security. This can contribute to the young person's ability to engage in new situations and make new friendships and community bonds.

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that Ana's process of developing a sense of belonging in the choir was an ongoing, cyclical process. Our discussion examines one iteration of that process, rather than presenting final, best-practice theories. In line with IRP, we invite the reader to reflect on the findings as they may apply to their own contexts.

Ana's process began with her situated on the periphery of the social group (Kenny, 2016; Rinde and Kenny, 2021). Over time, collaborative action through sharing musical experiences and the music educator's facilitation of a safe space moved her towards the centre of choir life. From this position of safety, she was grounded in both the present activity and her past self, prior to relocation. This promoted her well-being, resulting in greater inclusion and the cultivation of a sense of belonging.

GROUP SINGING AND SHARING

The illustrative quotes in Figures 2 – 4 show that in Ukraine Ana had a wider social group at her ordinary school than in her music school. In her interviews she came across as a more introverted and shy character than how she described herself in her previous social life in Ukraine. After her relocation, this confident, outgoing character reversed, leading to an increase in social anxiety, particularly during unstructured social times where she reported preferring to be alone and “*escape to the library*”. During interviews, she described how it was easier for her to make friends at choir activities, which was not only in contrast with her school experiences in the UK, but also different from her experiences in Ukraine. It appears that music acted as a communication tool despite language barriers, as seen in Carlow (2004) and Crawford (2020). This allowed her to form friendships more easily by bonding over a shared interest.

Biographical data showed that opportunities to perform and tour with her musical team were central to her identity and her enjoyment of music both in Ukraine and in the UK. The shared aim of performance created unique and specific social bonds with fellow singers, a theme also present in other research (Turino, 2008; Marsh, 2016). Performing was a motivator for Ana, inspiring her to continue working hard despite the challenges of the rehearsal process; “even though singing in choir can be really tiring, *especially when we have many rehearsals before the concert...it’s really worth the time and makes things really special*”. It is interesting to note how this connects to her positive memories of group performance in Ukraine. There she was able to engage in performances, recordings and tours, which she remembered almost more positively than the musical learning itself. This holistic approach to musical engagement seemed to resonate with Ana when she reflected on her connection to the musical community in the UK. Musical involvement facilitated the sharing of deeper emotional connections through holistic endeavours, experiences of teamwork, collaboration and feelings of camaraderie. As well as corroborating findings from previous studies regarding the positive impacts singing has on wellbeing (Parker, 2010, 2014; Welch *et al.*, 2014; Zapata and Hargreaves, 2018, communal musical engagement suggests that the communal aspect of the activity is significant. Ana shared that since coming to the UK she has stopped cycling, an active hobby for her in Ukraine. We suggest that the individual and solitary nature of Ana’s cycling, in contrast to the communal experience of group singing, is significant in evaluating her sense of well-being and belonging in her new home.

This sharing of experiences beyond engagement in physical activities represents an entrainment of emotional and spiritual energy gained through musical performance (Clayton, 2012). Ana reported these feelings as giving participants something beyond the act of singing; an emotional and spiritual connection to both what they are doing, who they are doing it with and where they are doing it. For Ana, “*singing joins people together, it’s like we share the same thing, if that’s the song, a joke or just feeling.*” Not only was this deep sense of well-being facilitated through the power of performative collaborative action, but it was also strengthened by the creation of a safe rehearsal space where play and humour were central.

Play was highlighted as being a new experience for Ana regarding singing. She emphasised this as a contrast to her music school in Ukraine, which was described as being very “*serious*” and more summative. In the UK choir, the educational

approach was instead formative, which appeared to contribute to the reawakening of her personal identity as a confident and outgoing performer. Her ability to make friends and connections in her musical environment in the UK was similar to her non-music school environment in Ukraine, possibly due to this incorporation of play. In the observation data, play and humour during warm-ups allowed for a release of inhibitions and communication between singers that moved beyond language barriers. For Ana, this helped her become more uninhibited and realise that choir was a non-judgmental, safe space. Over time, she was able to increase her participation in these activities, leading to greater inclusion in the social and performative life of the choir.

GROUP SINGING AND INCLUSION

Collaborative action through play and humour was one aspect of creating a safe space and it was also identified as important by Ana. This is an additional element that expands upon concepts of play and fun in the literature. The humorous and playful activities shared by choir leaders helped Ana to realise that rehearsals were a space where she could experiment with their self-expression and make mistakes without shame. Ana talks about fellow singers being open to taking part and expressing themselves without fear of reprisal. She reported that this helped her to get involved in activities more easily than in her prior musical life, and over time, in our observations, we see her beginning to move from the margins of the community towards the centre as discussed above.

An important aspect of that safe space was also the positive role models within it, and the sense of mutual respect for the abilities of peers (Crawford 2007, 2020). As an example, Ana spoke about her admiration for her fellow singer's ability to sight read, highlighting this sense of respect for her peers who became positive music role models because of their skills. Further community influences were described by Ana when she spoke about her choir leader in Ukraine as a positive role model. This woman helped include her in many performance and social opportunities. This was mirrored in Ana's relationship with her sponsor⁴, who facilitated her involvement with the choir in the UK. Not only do we see similarities with the musical opportunities both women provided for Ana, but also with the more holistic and wider community connections that the influence of these role models provided. Music was the common connection that facilitated these relationships, and our data illustrated how immersion in music encouraged the grounding of Ana in the wider social and cultural life of the UK. For example, Ana shared her experiences of learning Christmas carols in the choir. The English carol repertoire was new to Ana and she described how learning the songs helped her to "*get the culture better*". When she was out in the city and heard carol singers, she was able to understand the cultural context and be included in the tradition of carol singing in the UK.

From this example, we, therefore, see that Ana's involvement in choir facilitated not just togetherness with her singing peers but also a greater sense of connection to the wider social and cultural life of her new home. Whilst this was a clear outcome of her involvement in the choir, such intimate community life was not easy to facilitate and took time to cultivate. For example, she was guarded about sharing

⁴ In the UK, Ukrainian refugees required a person to act as a sponsor before they could be granted entry to the country. A sponsor guaranteed to provide a place to live and help the refugee access services.

her refugee status initially because the tone of her conversations with friends changed to become more emotionally charged, which she did not like. She shared that it took time for her to realise that it is a part of her story, although she still preferred not to share this information because being a refugee did not define who she was. Therefore, it was important that the music educators allowed her time to make these disclosures when she was ready and in the way she felt most appropriate. Interestingly, this raises an area of potential discrepancy with literature that advocates promotion of inclusion through sharing the cultural music and art of the refugees' countries of origin (Karlsen, 2013; Karlsen and Westerlund, 2010; Marsh, 2015). Crawford refers to the benefits of '*transculturation*' (2020, p. 250), the process where cultural knowledge is shared in a two-way dialogue between refugee participants and their peers. However, in our study, this phenomenon was observed as a one-way process, which perhaps gave Ana the time and space she needed to share her personal story on her own terms.

Considering that the process of inclusion and belonging is cyclical and iterative, it holds that time is an important influencing factor. Coupled with this, the subjective and personal nature of these experiences necessitates that music educators do not apply a 'one-size-fits-all' model to move from passive inclusion to active belonging.

GROUP SINGING AND BELONGING

Given the impact of sharing and inclusion on belonging, we may suggest that to answer our research question, membership of a youth choir impacted the participant's sense of belonging through various community influences and actions. External factors, such as choice of repertoire (which contributed to deeper understanding of the wider social context to which Ana relocated), performative aims and opportunities, creating a safe physical and emotional space, and the passage of time were important facets in the process of increasing Ana's sense of belonging. However, it is perhaps the internal impacts over time that are most significant for Ana's integration. As time passed and singing experiences accumulated, Ana was able to share more of herself, which fostered togetherness and connection with choir members. Initially, this sharing was a challenge, for reasons of language barriers and personal emotional insecurity. The creation of a safe space enabled her to overcome these barriers through risk-taking, which gradually facilitated a more active part in community life. Crucially, this reflected her past social experiences before relocation, with music providing connection between her historical and current psychosocial contexts.

Through Ana's story, it came to light that her personal well-being, through a strong emotional and spiritual connection to group singing, which she described as "*magical*", was significant in her sense of belonging. For example, learning from her peers' diverse experiences of the same piece of music contributed to her understanding of different perceptions and perspectives through "*share[ing] much more things than you can like, just talk with people*". This can be the basis of meaningful connections and friendship. Collaborative action and community influences create positive environments and opportunities for inclusion by creating safe spaces for Ana to express herself completely, removing fear and creating a sense of acceptance. Play and humour were central to this process, with silliness and laughter creating bridges (Marsh, 2016). Furthermore, the act of singing itself seemed to have an ice-breaking effect, and we suggest similarly with Pearce *et al.*

(2015), that the neuropsychological and hormonal impacts of group singing had a positive impact on her individual well-being, which further enhanced this sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Whilst a single-participant case study has its limitations, we are not using this study to make any firm recommendations or conclusions, rather we are inviting the reader to reflect on the experience and the learning gained from this participant. This learning can then be used as a way of grounding and shaping future research and practice. In particular, we would be interested to explore the fourth of Gould's (2005) recommendations for integrating refugees into their new homes through the inclusion and sharing of songs from their home communities, as outlined in the discussion section of this article.

The strategies and techniques employed by music educators to cultivate inclusion and belonging should consider how to engage the community in action and take account of the multiple influences that can impact the inherently social, participatory, creative and collaborative nature of group singing (Crawford, 2020). It might be helpful for educators to talk to students and make efforts to understand their unique, individual experiences, perspectives, needs and wants. From Ana's story, it seems that belonging is found when external and internal processes are synthesised. These experiences become internalised over time and through emotional connections to space, people, and shared activities such as music. These connections, through immersion in music, cultivate a grounded sense of self and autonomy that unite her past self with her new sense of self as mediated through new socio-cultural realities.

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